

Response to the ILLC PhD Programme Evaluation Report 2023

Formulated by the MT under directorship of Robert van Rooij

April 4, 2024

The institute would like to thank the members of the 2023 Programme eValuation Committee (PVC) consisting of Sandro Pezzelle (chair), Gregor Behnke, Marianna Girlando, and Karolina Krzyzanowska for their detailed report. The report contains insightful reflections about the overall quality of the ILLC PhD programme, as well as several recommendations addressed to the ILLC management but also to other actors, in particular supervisors. In this report we will respond specifically to the recommendations addressed to the PhD Programme and ILLC management. The other recommendations have been communicated by the PVC chair to the ILLC staff members during the ILLC Heidag in January 2024. They will be again discussed during the next supervision lunch (planned for May-June 2024).

Social cohesion and work environment

Recommendations

- R1 Disparities among PhD candidates.** It is crucial that all ILLC PhD candidates feel equally part of the ILLC PhD Programme and the Institute. We recommend: (1) making efforts to equalize rules, duties, opportunities, and, wherever possible, financial aspects among PhD candidates; (2) strengthening the activities and opportunities for doctoral students from across the whole Institute to meet and feel part of the same community, despite the inevitable differences that may exist. This recommendation is primarily addressed to the ILLC and the ILLC PhD Programme's heads.
- R2 Little sense of belonging** It is crucial that every PhD candidate feels part of some group or community within the ILLC. We recommend that particular attention be paid to this aspect and efforts to ensure

that everyone is actively invited and involved in lab and unit activities; for example, by having lunch together. Supervisors and members of each unit obviously have a key role in this. We therefore address this recommendation particularly to them.

Response The PhD and ILLC managements share the concerns expressed in the PVC report about the inequality among PhD candidates. The most crucial difference is among the fully employed PhD candidates and those with external funding. (Besides the financial differences, the latter group does not have teaching duties. This results in more hours for research, which can be viewed as an advantage but can also have negative effects on the competitiveness of their cv.) We are also aware that there are further individual differences among candidates depending on how active their research groups are, which unit they belong to, in which location they operate, etc. The ILLC PhD management views as its main challenge to guarantee high quality training and equal opportunities to all members of this diverse community. The measure taken so far to this aim have been the following: (i) to minimise the financial differences between employed and externally funded PhD candidates, the Faculties top-up scholarships (264 euro per month in 2023 and 316 in 2024), and the institute guarantees to every PhD candidate a travel budget of 2000 euros and a training budget of 1000 euros per year irrespective to the nature of their contract; (ii) all PhD candidates are guaranteed office space (often even at two locations); (iii) besides the rules regulating teaching, all other regulations apply to all ILLC PhD candidates (two supervisors rule, yearly evaluation rounds, transferable skill programme, etc); and finally, (iv) to increase a sense of community and foster cohesion across groups we will continue with the buddies system and we have recently increased the budget for the organisation of regular social activities by the PhD social committee.

R3 Gender inequalities. Some PhD candidates who self-identify as female report being more frequently than their male colleagues asked to organize events and to give presentations that are primarily meant to promote the Institute (so these are not opportunities for the candidates to receive meaningful feedback). We want to raise everyone's awareness on this point. Equality is an important issue for the ILLC. While ensuring that traditionally underrepresented groups are more visible at various events helps to promote diversity, inviting only female PhD students by default might also lead to overburdening them and may even hurt their careers. Event organizers should pay attention to the

gender ratio, both among speakers and among those involved in organizational tasks. Since ensuring gender balance is not always a trivial matter, we have raised the issue with the Diversity Committee which will prepare guidelines on this topic.

- R4 **Social safety.** Social safety is important for the ILLC, and for UvA as a whole, that is why there are confidential advisers appointed by UvA, and there is a dedicated ILLC PhD coach who could be contacted by those experiencing any form of undesirable behavior. However, PhD candidates may not know they can also receive support concerning issues they experience in academic contexts outside of the institute. We would like to encourage the Programme Director and the supervisors to make sure that PhD candidates are aware of the support they can receive if they feel their safety or well-being is threatened, and to regularly check on their supervisees, especially during their extended stays outside of the Institute.

Response These are both very important issues. The Diversity Committee is developing guidelines on how to promote diversity without leading to extra burden for the traditionally underrepresented groups, which the ILLC management will follow. We further asked them to advise on how to better organise the information about social safety (also outside of the institute) on the ILLC webpage. Please note that since June 2023 posters with information on who to contact if experiencing unsafe situations are hanging at various places in the two ILLC locations, and information about social safety has been shared at introduction meetings with new PhD candidates and at the PhD assembly.

Supervision, feedback, and evaluation

Recommendations

- R1 **Concerns with milestones and official assessments.** Our recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of crucial evaluation moments include clarifying guidelines and fostering uniformity in expectations. We believe this will address reported concerns of inconsistency and ambiguity, promoting a more straightforward and equitable assessment process. Specifically, we would like to urge the supervisors to clearly explain their expectations about the 9-month report at the very beginning of the PhD candidate's contract, to avoid misunderstandings and surprises.

R2 Lack of a “progress bar”. Supervisors can and should be explicit about how they see the progress of the student and reassure the student if they believe they are doing well. If they expect a certain number of publications by the end of the PhD, they should be clear about that as well. We also recommend that at least one person within each supervising team confidently assesses the progress of the student. Finally, we encourage supervisors to have more check-in moments and open discussions on how things are going. Official assessments and yearly evaluations are certainly a good moment for this, but they should not be the only occasions to provide feedback.

Response These issues have been discussed with the ILLC staff during the Heidag and also will be again raised during the upcoming supervision lunch. We already have a dedicated section devoted to the description of the 9-month report in the Teaching and Supervision Plan (TSP) to be prepared in the first 3 months of the PhD project. The PhD webpage has an explicit progress bar concerning the administrative duties and courses of the PhD candidates. Supervisors should be further encouraged to give more feedback on research progress as well.

Mental health issues

Recommendation We recommend two key measures to support our PhD candidates. First, we encourage supervisors to provide constant advice and support, addressing challenges like rejections, peer pressure, internship stress, and publication pressure. Second, we recommend the PhD Programme Director organize a peer-to-peer tutorial or workshop focused on internships, offering insights into the application process and procedures (including dealing with interviews and possible rejections). We believe that these two recommendations, when implemented together, can contribute to alleviating the reported stress, to make it more manageable and less overwhelming for our candidates.

Response These issues have been addressed in the past supervision lunch in June 2023, and will be addressed again in the next supervision lunch because they are very important. We will further ask senior researchers in the NLP and Quantum groups to organise an information session or tutorial about application process and procedures around internships.

Teaching Assistant duties

Recommendation

R1 Missing or unclear TA agreements. We strongly recommend two key measures to enhance the effectiveness of the TA assignment process. Firstly, TA agreements must be finalized before the beginning of courses. This recommendation extends to both course coordinators and the PhD Programme, emphasizing the need for timely reminders and a streamlined process. Additionally, PhD candidates are encouraged to play an active role in seeking and reminding their course coordinators about completing TA agreements. Secondly, there is a need for clearer guidelines from the Programme to course coordinators and PhD candidates regarding what is reasonable to ask of a PhD candidate serving as a TA. We believe that establishing transparent expectations will mitigate misunderstandings and prevent mismatches in workload and responsibilities.

R2 Confusion on what counts as a “teaching assignment”. We strongly recommend that the Programme makes it clear from the outset what counts as a “teaching assignment” for PhD candidates, including what the required and optional tasks are. Furthermore, we recommend providing even clearer guidance on the supervision of projects and theses. The introductory meeting can be a good opportunity to clarify all this and prevent confusion. If it is administratively and financially possible, the Programme could also consider introducing a system to reward the time spent on thesis supervision and make it count as teaching (TA) hours.

Response Concerning the TA agreement forms: since Fall 2023, (i) at the start of every block we send reminders about the TA agreement forms to lecturers and TAs and (ii) the TA agreement forms are accessible not only to the lecturers but also to the TAs who can start filling them in and so have more control on the process. We hope these measures will help in streamlining the process. Concerning the teaching duties, every employed PhD candidate has to TA 6 courses during their PhD period, spending around 128 hours per course (2 days a week for 8 weeks, or one day a week for 16 weeks). On top of this they are further expected to help with other non-research activities including the supervision of theses. More specifically, every employed PhD candidate is expected to spend 0.2 fte on non-research activities during their 4-year appointment, i.e. $336 \times 4 = 1344$

hrs. The TA workload for 6 courses is $128 \times 6 = 768$ hrs in total. This leaves room for $1344 - 768 = 576$ hrs of non-research activities, including thesis supervision, which are expected but not regulated. This information can be found on the PhD@ILLC webpage (<https://phdprogramme.illc.uva.nl/current-candidates/training/teaching/#Workload>) and is further communicated to all new PhD candidates during the introduction meeting.

We have now decided to change this policy allowing a PhD candidate to replace one course with a number of thesis supervisions. Here are the new regulations, which will be operative from September 2024:

1. Employed PhD candidates are expected to help TAing in 6 courses;
2. They can use supervision of theses (or projects, in master BCs) in exchange of (up to 1) TA course assignment;
3. Three master theses counts for 1 TA assignment (if the PhD candidate is the main daily supervisor);¹
4. Four bachelor thesis supervision counts for 1 TA assignment (if the PhD candidate is the main supervisor).

Reimbursements

Recommendation We recommend enhancing clarity in onboarding procedures and maintaining it throughout the academic years, with particular attention to tailoring the information based on the specific funding situation of each PhD candidate. Supervisors should also be given this information so that they can have answers to their doctoral students' inquiries regarding these issues. This will ensure a more informed and transparent experience for all, aligning expectations with individual circumstances.

Response Every PhD candidate is entitled to a personal budget for travel expenses (2000 euros per year) and for training like summer schools (1000 euro per year), irrespective of the nature of their contract. PhD candidates funded by NWO and EU should be able to get these costs reimbursed from travel budget on their project, which is sometimes more generous. If the projects cannot guarantee the 2000+1000 euros per year, the ILLC will reimburse the remaining costs. This is all specified on the PhD@ILLC website: <https://phdprogramme.illc.uva.nl/current-candidates/other/financial/#Travel&trainingbudget>

¹As an exception to this rule, two 'old' (= 48EC) master AI theses counts for 1 TA assignment (if the PhD candidate was the main daily supervisor).

Outreach of the annual PVC report

Recommendation We recommend that this report be disseminated and made available to all involved parties. In this sense, we find that organizing a lunch with all the supervisors of PhD candidates is an excellent idea, which must certainly be reiterated and maintained. Furthermore, we propose that the report be made available on the Promovendi page so that it is more easily found by supervisors and candidates when needed. Finally, we think it is a very good idea to discuss it collectively with supervisors and PhD candidates (for example, in an ILLC current affairs meeting), to ensure that its recommendations are received and discussed, and perhaps updated and extended. In this way, the report can become a dynamic and participatory tool to improve the PhD Programme collectively and inclusively.

Response All PVC reports and MT responses are available on the ILLC PhD website. The 2023 PVC report has also been discussed with all ILLC staff members during the Heidag in January 2024, and will be discussed again during the supervision lunch in May-June 2024. The MT response 2023 will be discussed with the PVC committee and the PhD council before publication on the PhD@ILLC website.